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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

7 January 1971

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Soviet Perception of the Chinese Threat

1. Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated to their lowest point in the spring and summer of 1969 following the armed clashes on the Ussuri River in March. But then, beginning in the winter of 1969 and continuing throughout 1970, tensions showed signs of easing somewhat. Propaganda attacks became generally less belligerent, and after an interval of almost four years there was an exchange of ambassadors between Moscow and Peking. The border river shipping mixed committee met from 10 July to 19 December and agreed at least to meet again in 1971. There also has been continual, if unproductive, contact on disputed border territories. A protocol signed in December promises some increase in the low level of bilateral trade. All this suggests the restoration of something approaching normal state-to-state relations.

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2. It might thus seem logical to conclude that the chances of Sino-Soviet war have virtually disappeared. But such a conclusion is not sustained by an examination of both the basic factors underlying the conflict and the military developments accompanying (and contributing to) it.

Background of the Conflict

3. The causes of the Sino-Soviet dispute are complex and intertwined. Some reflect the clash of national interests, compounded by historical and racial enmities, and the distrust of one great power for a neighboring power. These conflicting interests include, for example, the USSR's refusal in the late 1950s to satisfy China's demands for the wherewithal to achieve an instant nuclear weapons capability, diverging foreign policies and international priorities, Chinese dissatisfaction with the terms of Soviet economic aid and Soviet economic sanctions, Sino-Russian competition for influence elsewhere in East and South Asia, China's claims to Far Eastern and Central Asian territory ceded to Russia during the 19th century. To some extent these issues would have arisen to complicate relations between Russians and Chinese regardless of the political systems in Moscow and Peking.

4. Ideological factors, which do stem from the types of regime in power, have been another source of contention. Mao's challenge to Soviet ideological supremacy, together with his rejection of Soviet strategies for the spread of Communism, have provoked serious disputes between Moscow and Peking and in meetings of the world's Communist Parties. Largely because of ideology, Soviet and Chinese conceptions of each other's motives and behavior tend to become encapsulated in doctrinal formulae. The two sides therefore find it hard to compromise their quarrels on major non-ideological issues, or even to agree to disagree on the minor ones.

5. Specific issues also give rise to Sino-Soviet ill-will and conflict. The Soviets have been especially sensitive to various Chinese attempts to fish in troubled waters in Eastern Europe. Moscow apparently was stung, for example, when the Chinese last month used the riots and the change of leadership in Poland to proclaim, that "Soviet revisionist imperialism" in Eastern Europe is in a "deep crisis". Even more alarming, in the Soviet view, is any indication of improvement in Peking's relationship with either of the USSR's most important Cold War antagonists, Bonn or Washington. (Peking,

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of course, is quick to accuse the USSR of acting in collusion with the US.) Soviet concerns in this regard are reflected, for example, in Moscow's apparent belief that Peking has invited West German scientists to work in Chinese nuclear/missile programs, and in private Soviet statements in the fall of 1969 to the effect that Moscow would regard US diplomatic recognition of Peking as de facto alignment against the USSR. (There have been some recent indications that the Soviets are beginning to regard the Japanese in these terms as well, i.e., as potential collaborators with the Chinese against the USSR.)

6. For several years the Chinese have competed with the Soviets for influence in the Third World and among the "national liberation movements". The Soviets fear that much of the population is receptive to Peking's appeals based on racial affinity and the common predicament of have-not countries. The Soviets no doubt would much prefer some of these states -- e.g. India, Indonesia -- to remain non-Communist than to fall under Chinese control.

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7. China's political influence, present and potential, is seen in Moscow as a world-wide challenge to Soviet interests. There are "Maoist" groups in more than 40 countries, by Soviet reckoning, and the Soviets stress to their allies that these groups are not only the apostles of heretical ideology but also the auxiliary detachments of a power hostile to the USSR. But the more serious threat to the USSR, the threat to the security of the Soviet state, is China's growing military power.

The Military Aspect

8. Three types of Chinese military threat concern the Soviets. First, there have been border clashes, particularly severe ones in the spring and summer of 1969. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] 1969 clashes were viewed as a Chinese attempt to open a "bleeding wound", and that a temporary crisis of public confidence in Soviet military power occurred because Moscow had failed to prevent such clashes. Secondly, the Soviets fear that at some time the Chinese might attempt to seize border regions which are particularly vulnerable (the Soviet Far East, where the Transsiberian Railroad runs

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close to the Manchurian Border) or have low population density (Mongolia) or large concentrations of non-Slavic ethnic groups (Central Asia). This fear may have lessened with the end of the Cultural Revolution and return of an ostensibly more "rational" behavior in Peking. But it could easily be revived (if, for example, the Chinese ground forces which moved generally northward over the last year come closer to the Soviet or Mongolian borders). Thirdly the Soviets are concerned about the emerging Chinese nuclear/missile programs -- not only because of the weapons themselves but also because of their possible value as a deterrent to Soviet retaliation in the event that Peking should elect to provoke the USSR in other ways.

9. We cannot say with complete confidence, of course, just how the Russians rate Chinese prospects in the field of strategic weapons. But we can safely assume that the Soviets know as much or more than we do about Chinese capabilities and that their apprehensions on the subject will incline them toward worst case estimating regarding both Chinese intentions and capabilities. [] the Soviets believe that the Chinese are trying to develop a ballistic missile able to

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reach the European USSR and that China may have several hundred such missiles by the mid-1970s. In addition, the Soviets must be watching the steady if still modest production of Chinese TU-16 medium bombers and the possibility that the Chinese may be developing air-to-surface missiles for these bombers. Moreover, one Soviet spokesman has indicated that Moscow believes the Chinese have embarked on a seven year program of building five to eight nuclear powered submarines equipped with ballistic missiles. To the Soviets, all these developments signify that the Chinese are broadening their capability to attack Soviet installations in the event of a Sino-Soviet war.

10. For several years the Soviets have been taking contingency measures to meet at least the first two principal types of Chinese threat (border conflict, invasion of Soviet or Mongolian territory). To meet the first threat, the KGB Border Guard units near China gradually have been augmented, and their conventional combat capabilities broadened. Indeed some of these units are equipped with the T-62, the best medium tank currently deployed with the Soviet armed forces. These Soviet forces are able to contain border clashes, even though by themselves they cannot prevent them.

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11. To meet the second broad type of threat, a Chinese attack on Soviet or Mongolian territory, the Soviets evidently made a decision in mid-1965 to expand their regular ground and tactical air strength near China. The number of Soviet divisions located in the present Military Districts bordering China and in Mongolia has more than doubled over the past five years.* This effort probably has begun to affect Soviet theater force strength elsewhere. Indeed, in June 1970, a Soviet army lecturer stated at a public meeting in Moscow that the Warsaw Pact's strength against NATO had been weakened because of the competing demands of the China problem.

12. It is worth noting that each Soviet division has a free rocket over ground (FROG) battalion organic to it. The FROG is the only weapon in a Soviet division capable of delivering a nuclear warhead [REDACTED]

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* The Military Districts are the Far East, Transbaykal, Siberian, and Central Asian, the last one carved out of the Turkestan MD in 1969 following the Ussuri River clashes.

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[REDACTED] What particularly distinguishes Soviet from Chinese ground forces, therefore, is the ability of the former to wage tactical nuclear war. Soviet broadcasts to China have, on occasion, pointedly reminded the Chinese of this distinction.

The Problem of Initiating Active Hostilities

13. During the summer of 1969 Soviet officials took soundings, in several places, on third country reaction to a potential Soviet attack on Chinese nuclear and missile installations. Presumably the Soviets intended these ominous hints to reach the Chinese, thereby causing the Chinese to enter bilateral negotiations and to cease provoking armed clashes on the border. If that was the intention, it achieved its purposes. But there is some feeling in the US intelligence community that Moscow did indeed have this drastic military option under review. Soviet spokesmen have privately hinted as much, implying that the optimum period for exercising this option would pass as the Chinese acquired a credible missile deterrent against the USSR.

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14. Soviet propaganda during 1969 was consonant with the notion that Moscow was considering some form of military action against the border areas of Sinkiang, Manchuria, or even Inner Mongolia. Articles and broadcasts deplored the oppression of Uighurs, Kazakhs, and Mongols in China, and suggested that rebellion by these peoples would be justified. Moscow surfaced a Uighur refugee now living in the USSR, identified him as a general, and thereby created the impression that a nascent "liberation" army existed. For the Soviets, the protection of national minorities against alleged Chinese oppression might have served as the pretext for opening the war (even for bombing Chinese nuclear and missile facilities). In addition, the detachment of border areas would have enabled the Soviets to establish a buffer zone like that in Eastern Europe.

15. Other potential benefits of military action probably were considered. Perhaps it was argued in Moscow that defeat of Chinese forces would demonstrate the might of Soviet armed forces throughout the world -- and have useful political side effects -- and help the perhaps sagging prestige of the Soviet leadership at home. The Soviets might also have

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expected in this way to precipitate the downfall of the Mao-Lin regime and hoped that its successor would be more "realistic" vis-a-vis the USSR, or at least less troublesome.

16. But if indeed the Soviets were considering military action against China, they obviously decided, at least for the near term, that the disadvantages of initiating military action outweighed the advantages. Militarily, the Soviets could not be certain of the outcome.* Even if the Soviet leaders were persuaded that a conventional air strike would knock out Chinese nuclear or missile installations, they probably calculated that Chinese retaliation would require a Soviet response against Chinese troops or installations with at least tactical nuclear weapons. Even then the Chinese, though at a great disadvantage in modern weaponry, might still deliver nuclear strikes on Vladivostok or Khabarovsk.

17. The Soviets seem to understand that if they were the first to use nuclear weapons in a Sino-Soviet conflict, their violation of the nuclear truce of the past quarter

* For a variety of reasons, the Soviets probably never seriously considered total war against China, waged to total victory.

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century might alter not just world public opinion but the basic foreign policies of other states toward the USSR. They would fear that the United States might feel less inhibited about using nuclear weapons in Vietnam. They would also fear that their action would encourage a number of other states -- including West Germany, India, and particularly Japan -- to acquire their own nuclear capabilities. They would worry that their embroilment with China would lead to a reduction of their role in the Middle East. And finally, in Asia itself, they would be apprehensive that, even after a successful limited nuclear blow against China, the USSR would still be faced with a hostile China, one which might moreover have gained the sympathy and support of both India and Japan.

"Peaceful Coexistence" in Sino-Soviet Relations?

18. In August 1969 Soviet Party chief Leonid Brezhnev suggested in the propaganda journal Problems of Peace and Socialism that Moscow expected a long period of tension in Sino-Soviet relations rather than an early outbreak of hostilities. The very character of the collegium in Moscow might have predisposed it toward a policy of prudence -- in this

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case, continual improvement in Soviet military defenses against China, plus inconclusive bilateral discussions -- rather than toward a sudden irreversible act. In any case, the dominant notes struck by most Soviet spokesmen publicly [REDACTED] since that time have been Moscow's patience, Soviet friendship with the Chinese people during this temporary period of misrule by Mao, and the likely pragmatism of the post-Mao regime.

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19. There are believed to be abiding anxieties among China watchers in Moscow, however. One such view, reported to have wide support in Soviet circles, is that the men who come to power in China after Mao will be "super-Maoists", inclined to "radical solutions" in the face of China's insoluble internal problems. The logic of that view, in Moscow at any rate, is that China likely will become more aggressive toward the USSR, more willing to collaborate with Soviet enemies, more of a military threat along the border. Meeting this challenge will require the USSR itself to pursue "radical solutions" toward China.

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20. We believe the Brezhnev policy of prudence toward China will prevail for at least the near term. It probably will receive formal sanction at the 24th CPSU Congress, and followed so long as Brezhnev remains in charge. But China will stay very much on the Soviet mind. As the Yugoslavs keep reminding us, it is especially difficult for the USSR to accept "peaceful coexistence" with another Communist state. Basically, then, we view the Soviet approach to the China threat in terms of a problem acknowledged rather than solved, action perhaps only deferred rather than decided.

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